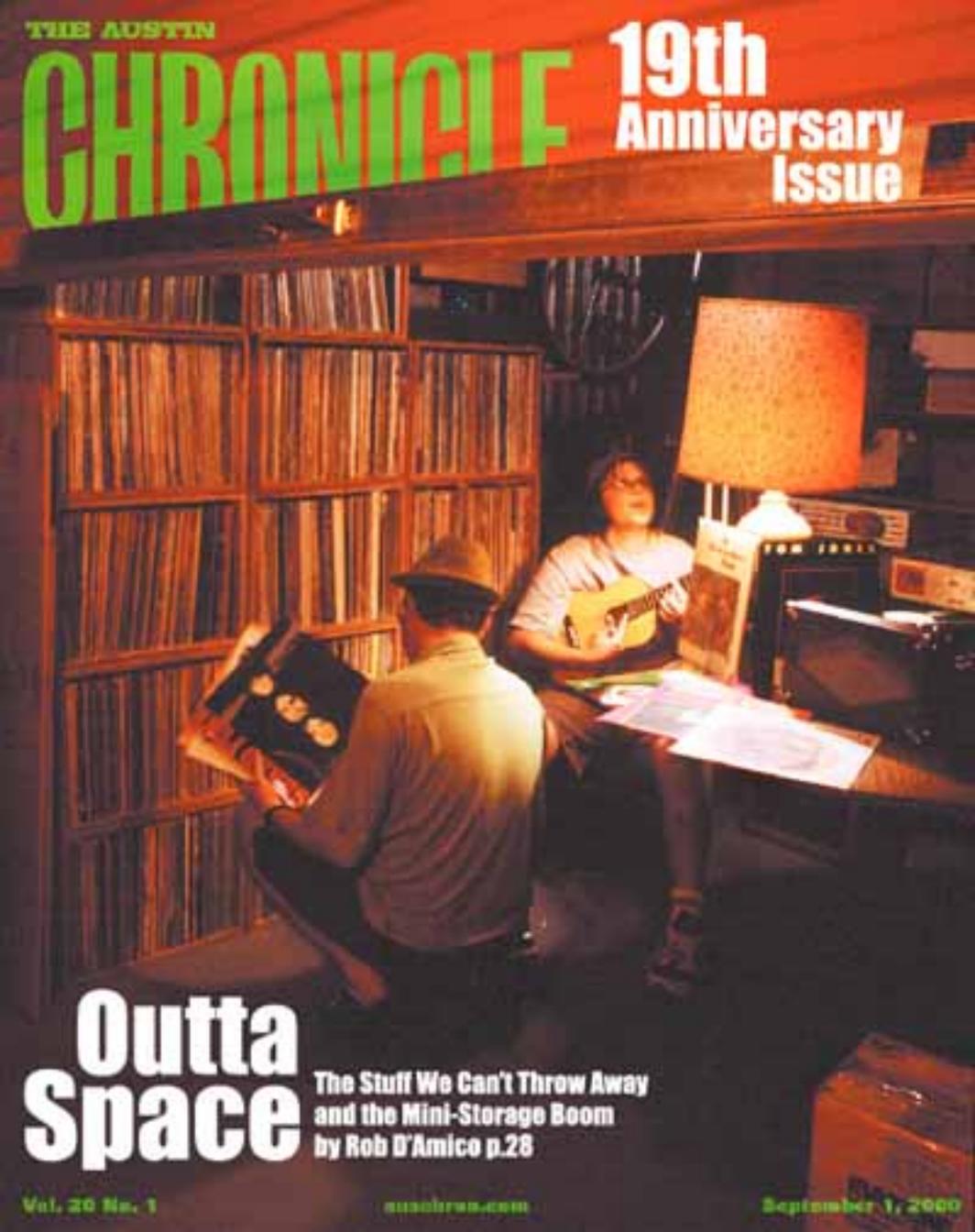


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Outta Space

The Stuff We Can't Throw Away
and the Mini-Storage Boom
by Rob D'Amico p.28

NEWS

What's In Store

Has Mini-Storage Become Mega-Storage?

BY ROB D'AMICO, FRI., SEPT. 1, 2000



She rose dramatically, with a fiery sword in her hand and her breasts cupped in golden armor plate. Her scaly abdomen and tail fin protruded from a sea of bubble wrap on the other side of the trash heap. She was beautiful. And I had to have her, this plaster warrior mermaid rising from the rubbish of the U-HAUL self-storage trash dumpster. Better sense prevailed as I realized that my front porch would be the only place to put the immense sculpture. My wife's glance also suggested that the mermaid would be unacceptable to our Central Austin neighborhood's aesthetic sensibilities. Still, I wondered, who on Earth would throw away such a remarkable piece of art? More importantly, who would store it and then throw it away?

Self-storage units have always been our second attics, jammed to the rafters with things we can't part with. But today's rented attics are bigger, fancier, and more costly than ever before. And they're harder to get into. On any given day, most of the city's 220 facilities are near 100% occupancy -- some are even keeping waiting lists. Gone are the days of the \$35-per-month locker in a strip of garages with roofs that leaked and rodents that kept watch over your belongings. The old storage units have been replaced by climate-controlled rooms spread along corridors equipped with alarms and security cameras to keep our junk cool and secure -- all to the tune of \$50-\$195 a month. These behemoths represent the end of the "mini" in "mini-storage," and driven by demand, they are sprouting from the landscape of open suburban spaces and squeezing into packed commercial strips in the city's central core.

In 1995, for example, the Old West Austin neighborhood cheered the move of a car dealership from West Sixth Street and envisioned a continuing trend of quaint little shops and restaurants filling the space between Lamar Boulevard and MoPac. Then came the word ... Public Storage was moving in with a huge facility designed to store business documents. So much for the paperless society. The 87,500-square-foot, climate-controlled, block of storage units the company planned would sprawl across a huge lot and turn a blank face to the street. Neighborhood activists put up a fight and the company provided retail space; so beignets, New Orleans-style coffee, and Cajun food are now available at a small restaurant affixed to Public Storage's big box. There's also a small gym.

While the storage facility with the Cajun cuisine leitmotif got a lot of attention because it moved into an Old Austin neighborhood, the recent boom in big storage operations is most evident in North Central Austin. Drive the 6400 block of Burnet Road and you can see the city's storage boom happening. If you were there last week, you could have rented one of the three remaining spaces in the nation's second-largest facility -- Burnet Road Self Storage, which boasts 1,700 storage units. Its newest neighbor, the towering Extra Space Self Storage building, opened its doors two months ago with 560 units. It, too, is almost completely full.



Keith Northrop at Top Hat Self Storage (Photo By Jana Birchum)



Abandoned self-storage on East Ben White (Photo By Jana Birchum)

If you accept the conservative estimate that each of Austin's 220 storage businesses has about 200 units averaging 100 square feet, you've got 44,000 units and a total of 4,400,000 square feet of space, which then equate to about 3,142 houses (each at 1,400 square feet). That's a lot of stuff. And the space and stuff continue to grow. Some 80,000 new people are expected to move to the Austin area within the next year, bringing with them the old sofas, books, and lamps that won't fit the space or decor of their new homes. Much of it will find its way into storage units operated by the big players in the Austin market: Public Storage (16 area locations) and U-HAUL (eight area locations). Neither offered specifics on expansion plans, but another of the local giants, Shurgard Storage Centers (six area locations), will open the doors on four new facilities within the next year or two. These national companies are publicly traded Real Estate Investment Trusts that have seen remarkable growth and are adding up to 50 new facilities a year in the United States. Public Storage, for instance, operates more than 1,330 locations nationwide and increased its revenue 16% this year, to \$643 million.

Small Closets

It is evident that even if the city were to achieve zero population growth -- not exactly a real possibility -- the self-storage business would continue to grow. Some growth is driven by business. Blame it on the guy next to you, who prints out all his e-mail, but at least 50% of the storage units rented in Austin are filled with business documents -- or trade-show materials and seasonal displays. University of Texas students are another driving factor, as they often need places to keep their books, furniture, and bicycles during the summer. But it's also evident that people just plain have more stuff nowadays, and in some homes, a lot less space to keep it.

Ryan Robinson, a demographer who works on the city of Austin's *Growth Watch* newsletter, doesn't track self-storage unit construction. "We've got lots of crappy data, just no data on crap," he jokes. But he makes a simple yet keen observation regarding Austin's houses. "Look at all the old houses in Austin," Ryan says. "They all have small closets." Indeed, the

closets in pre-1970 homes are laughable. "Back then" we didn't have so much stuff, which made the self-storage industry a nothing on the radar screen -- until about the mid-1970s. So one development driving the market is a class of urban professionals with real disposable income, moving into those old houses with small closets. (No one has connected any trends in the two industries, but Burnet Road Self Storage sits on the spot once occupied by the Burnet Road Drive In. The sign, which gives the business a certain Fifties nostalgia, is all that remains. So around the time people stopped going to drive-ins, it seems, they became more acquisitive.)

Rich Ellmer, a self-storage veteran who owns Cypress Storage Stalls at 2229 E. Ben White Boulevard, leans back in his office chair and ponders the mystery. Plaques thanking Ellmer for service to local real estate and self-storage groups line the walls. His 203 units have stored South Austin's odds and ends since 1976. Ellmer knows that in a rational world the business he is in would be much more competitive. "Generally, after six to eight months, the money they pay for the storage exceeds the value of the items," Ellmer says. "It's easier just to write a check for another month and pay. People just don't want to be bothered." Gradually, however, some of his tenants realize that the cost of storage has surpassed the value of the objects they are paying to store. During the past quarter of a century, Ellmer has seen many stories unfold -- many of them with the same storyline. Someone rents a space for years, sometimes more than a decade, then comes in one day and asks that it all be thrown away.

Yet for everyone who cleans out his storage unit and closes out a rental agreement, there is someone else with a warrior mermaid too beautiful to throw away -- at least for a while.

Top Hat Makeover

As the city has grown, the places we rely on to store those mermaids have changed. Just as the drive-in gave way to the cineplex, storage motels like the one owned by Rich Ellmer are being displaced by multilevel storage hotels. And the corporate culture of Public Storage's high-rises is far different from what you find at Ellmer's Cypress Storage Stalls -- and the Top Hat, whose owners, like Ellmer, are a part of the city's commercial and social landscape. Sandra Bell and Keith Northrop regularly canoe Town Lake and fish its waters. They haul in perch about the size of walnuts and ignore the stares and giggles from the onlookers on shore, then take their catch home to an aquarium. The aquarium is storage, really, where the fish live until being fed to dwarf crocodiles in nearby tanks. Sandra and Keith's office in the Top Hat Self Storage complex at 4500 S. Congress is a zoo of lizards, snakes, turtles and other critters, all kept in the confines of aquariums and cages. According to the Top Hat owners, the animals and an overgrowth of ivy are there to diffuse the tension that accompanies storing or moving.

Bell, a talkative woman with blond braids and a persistent smile, lowers her voice, and explains: "Anytime someone stores something, there's something stressful going on in their life." Often that stress is caused by moving, divorce, death, or all three, leaving Bell on the receiving end of potential abuse from customers. "Lots of divorces," she continues. "Those are ones we need to be real careful of. While he or she is at work, [the other] clears out the house. Then I have the other spouse in here ranting and raving, saying, 'You have my hunting gear.'" (Cypress Storage Stalls owner Ellmer says some divorce attorneys even advise clients to take their spouse's possessions and hide them.) Bell and Northrop agree that the best medicine is a smile. And their assortment of animals is often useful to start a friendly conversation.

Often the conversation turns to Top Hat's history. The storage complex was once the site of a famous South Austin club of the same name, which was demolished in the Seventies. "A lot of people come in and say, 'I remember the Top Hat, that's why I want to store here,'" Bell says. She obviously appreciates the business, and yet is philosophical about why so many people resort to storing their possessions in rental units. Although the human tendency to be "pack rats" might be natural, Bell admits that at times she finds it sad, because so many can't afford the high prices that self-storage demands nowadays. Elderly people are particularly stubborn when it comes to dealing with their possessions. "We have offered to help them move their stuff, but they just don't want to," she says. "It's sad, because they're having trouble paying their utilities and medication bills."

Northrop steps in and out of the Top Hat office, dividing his time between office chores, day-trading on his personal computer in the back room, and our discussion of self-storage. His reptiles and amphibians sit by passively, warming themselves under heat lamps or paddling gracefully through tanks. Northrop pauses to discuss one former tenant and the



Abandoned self-storage on East Ben White (Photo By Jana Birchum)

things he left behind. "I don't know how it could have been his, because it was all beat up," he says excitedly, with a boyish grin that doesn't quite fit with the menacing rattlesnake on his T-shirt. "But it looked like his."

What Northrop refers to is an old black hat that was left for him after Jimmie Vaughan and his mother came by to clean out Stevie Ray's storage space -- years after the blues guitarist died in August of 1990. Stevie Ray's storage unit contained mainly posters and other memorabilia from the music business. But Northrop and Bell, a married couple who took over managing the Top Hat in 1995, remember one peculiarity: the keys Stevie Ray had stolen from each hotel room he stayed in on one European tour. The keys must have had some value to Vaughan, but like many items, their value is often lost in memories when a life is lost. Vaughan stored more than his personal memorabilia at the Top Hat; his tour bus could often be seen in a rented spot on the back lot of the storage complex that had once been an Austin nightclub.

Auction Action

Over in East Austin, Johnnie Cassity cranks up her small window unit to fend off the heat in a tiny office fronting 144 units at the Access Self-Storage on Airport Boulevard. Cassity readily admits that the units are in a less desirable part of town, that there are no neon signs to attract customers, and that there are none of the moving-supply display racks the national companies set up in their rental offices. But Cassity also says that the business provides lower-cost storage with more personal service, which is why her units are mostly filled with longtime customers she has gotten to know over the years. "I've had entire families move into [several] units," she says. But like most managers, she wonders what compels people to keep their possessions behind lock and key for so long. "Most of the people who have been here have been customers five years or longer. Personally, I think if you haven't used it in five years, you don't need it. But if you don't want to get rid of Grandma's antiques, then I guess it's worth it."

Objects kept in self-storage also follow the greater laws of Garage Sale Physics, which say that items of value or peculiarity are never condemned to eternity at the landfill. Instead, they are advanced from buyer to buyer. When self-storage renters default on their leases, the only way the storage-unit managers can legally get rid of the items is by auctioning them. The managers go through a lengthy process of notifying the renter by certified mail that he is in default. Then a notice of the auction is posted in a newspaper, along with the owner's name. If the items aren't claimed and an arrangement worked out for payment, they are sold to the highest bidder -- often a buyer from a flea market. Five such auctions are scheduled in the next three weeks, all on weekends at the storage facilities sponsoring them. (Check the *Austin American-Statesman* classifieds under "Public Notices" for details.) The newspaper announcements merely note the renters' names and maybe some general details about what they're losing. In other words, you'll see: ROB D'AMICO, misc. items, clothes, appliances. But you won't see: ROB D'AMICO, home-brewers kit, box of Groucho Marx glasses with fuzzy eyebrows, leaky blender.

The usual method of selling entire units rather than individual items -- usually without allowing prospective buyers to look through the stuff -- offers an air of mystery to the auctions. It's sort of like the old game show *Let's Make a Deal*, where the top contestants ended up with the choice of trading their winnings for a pick of whatever was hidden behind one of three doors. More often than not, the contestants picked the donkey behind Door No. 3 instead of the Corvette behind Door No. 2. So it goes with self-storage booty. But then again, buyers never know when they are going to strike gold. "If they get one thing in there that's worth anything, they're happy," Bell says.



Photo By Jana Birchum

Because it's such a hassle and expense to auction items, storage managers go out of their way to work out payment arrangements with renters. They also know they might be selling something that is worth nothing, but has real sentimental value for the owner. In 1994, for example, an AP wire story reported that a Virginia woman thought her mother's remains were safe. The cremated ashes were kept at the Bunny Rabbit Self Storage units in a small labeled box. But the woman was late on her \$55-a-month payments and a snafu in communications between her and Bunny Rabbit ended up in a

premature auction of all her possessions, including dear old mom's remains. The woman also lost photo albums, her wedding dress, birth certificates and other prized possessions, which were sold in bulk for \$170.

So it's hardly surprising that Cassity is reluctant to resort to auctions. A lot of her renters are elderly or disabled and may have trouble getting to her office or even the Post Office to get a payment in. She goes to considerable effort to avoid auctioning off their belongings. "I've gone to people's jobs to pick up payments. I've gone to people's houses. I will do what is necessary to make arrangements, so that [late rent] is not an issue." Bell observes that it's "crazy" that people will forget payments, rack up late charges, pay them off, then do it all over again after a few months -- when most of their stuff isn't worth anything.

Steal It, Please

The four men moved through the rows of storage with bolt cutters, lopping off padlocks as if they were clipping toenails. Surveillance cameras recorded their masked visages and the ease with which they ripped off the units. The quartet burglarized more than 450 units over the course of several months. "These guys would go into these storage facilities and would burglarize up to 20 at a time," says Austin Police Department Commander Ken Williams. "The one thing in common for each burglary ... the kind of lock determined if they broke in or not." Police eventually made arrests in July and found that much of the stolen property was later recovered at ... you guessed it, a U-HAUL storage space. Even thieves need storage. Williams didn't say what kind of lock was used to secure the stolen goods.

"Cheap locks promote theft," says Ellmer, who requires all his customers to use disk locks that are much harder to crack. Fences and gates with combination access aren't a barrier either. "There's no way to keep them out," Ellmer says. "People will just tailgate [behind a customer] and go right in." If you had to guess, you'd probably think that the little independent operations are most easily burglarized. But of the eight locations hit by the recent burglary ring, five were big-name national companies. The best deterrent is presence, says Ellmer. "When people see the owner out there, it helps." Bell says she rarely has problems with break-ins, because she and her husband live on the Top Hat premises and their dog patrols the grounds after hours. Although not a guard dog, the collie mix is possessed of the only real requirement for protection: a loud bark. Cassity says that petty thieves -- mainly juveniles who use bolt cutters to cut through the wire fence and the cheap locks her tenants seemed to prefer -- attacked her Airport Boulevard location on a regular basis. When Access Storage began handing out a free disk lock (a \$15 dollar value) to each new customer, the break-ins subsided. Cassity says she is often amazed to see people bring in a truckload of their personal belongings, pay more than \$50 bucks a month to store it, then try to protect it all with a \$3 lock from the Mini Mart next door.

Missing Madalyn?

No one ever claimed that every criminal mind is possessed of great intelligence. The three men alleged to have kidnapped and murdered atheist leader Madalyn Murray O'Hair and her family locked up their ransom loot -- \$500,000 of the O'Hair's money converted into gold coins -- in a self-storage unit on Burnet Road, where they secured a half-million dollars in gold with a \$10 padlock. A different trio -- petty thieves from San Antonio -- stumbled across the treasure in an October, 1995, break-in and easily bypassed the lock with a skeleton key. They were caught and later testified that they spent the entire fortune in less than four years -- on cars, trips, and other lavish items. In the end, much of the O'Hair ransom was spent in topless bars, where the three small-time felons from San Antonio regularly ran up tabs the \$1,000 range.

"The gold was stored here, not the bodies," says Kathy Hall, manager of Burnet Road Self Storage. Hall explains that the ransom for the O'Hairs -- Madalyn, her son Jon Garth Murray and her granddaughter Robin Murray O'Hair -- was found at her facility, but that doesn't mean the bodies ever overnighted there. Authorities have yet to find the O'Hairs, but the discovery of stored and stolen gold was one of the more bizarre episodes in the history of self-storage in Austin.

For some reason, many people assume that self-storage units are often the temporary resting places for victims of nefarious crimes. But petty criminal uses are far more likely. Cassity is continually on the lookout for people trying to get rid of old tires or hazardous chemicals by renting space and abandoning the materials. On one occasion, she caught a lady of the evening setting up shop on an old mattress. Several managers recounted stories of people trying to live in units -- even

ones without climate control in the middle of August. And a five-by-seven Burnet Road self-storage locker even housed a large cache of drug money hidden by a UT English professor -- in Jim Magnuson's 1998 mystery novel *Windfall*.

No one has yet reported the O'Hairs as storage-unit tenants. ■

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